

Traffic Safety Facts

Laws

Volume 1

Number 1

May 2003

Strengthening Child Passenger Safety Laws – Increase Laws – Increase Car Seat and Belt Use, Decrease Crash Fatalities and Injuries

Traffic crashes are a leading cause of death in the United States. All 50 States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Territories have child passenger safety laws (“car seat laws”). However, many of these laws have significant gaps and exemptions in coverage that diminish the protection that all children need in motor vehicles.

Essential Components of a Strong Law

Child passenger safety laws should cover every child (up to age 16), in every seating position, in every passenger vehicle. In 2002, NHTSA partnered with the National Committee on Uniform Traffic Laws and Ordinances, the National Transportation Safety Board, the Air Bag & Seat Belt Safety

Campaign, the Automotive Coalition for Traffic Safety, Inc., and the Governors Highway Safety Association to create a “model law” which can assist States in drafting the language needed to eliminate the gaps that often occur in occupant protection legislation. This law recommends that every occupant (both children and adults) of a motor vehicle in motion should be covered at all times by an occupant protection law. This law is available at <http://www.ncutlo.org>

The following is a list of components that make up a strong child passenger law:

- **Cover all occupants up to age 16 in all seating positions.** All child passenger laws should cover children up to age 16; the adult belt law should apply to all other occupants. Although some child passenger laws cover babies and young children, most laws do not protect children up to 16 years of age. For example, in many States, a 10-year-old can legally ride in the back seat without being secured because the laws in those States apply only to front seat occupants.
- **Primary enforcement.** Occupant protection laws for children should be primary enforcement laws, which allow a law enforcement officer to stop a vehicle and issue a citation when the officer observes an unrestrained occupant.
- **Require child occupants to be properly restrained.** The law should explicitly require a child to be in an

age- and size-appropriate child restraint system. Currently, many States allow a child to be restrained in a safety belt when, in fact, a child safety seat or booster seat is the appropriate safety device for the child’s age and size.

- **Include all vehicles equipped with safety belts.** A strong child passenger law should apply to all vehicles that are equipped with safety belts; no vehicles (i.e., pickup trucks), should be exempt.
- **Make the driver responsible for restraint use by all children under 16 years of age.** Many laws assign responsibility to the parent or guardian, who may not be the driver or even be in the vehicle. Also, child passenger laws in many States do not assign responsibility to any specific adult, making these laws difficult to enforce.
- **Allow passengers to ride only in seating areas equipped with safety belts.** A strong child passenger safety law should not include exemptions that allow children to be transported in areas not equipped with safety belts, (e.g., the cargo area of a truck). This practice is extremely dangerous and places children at unnecessary risk for death or serious injury.
- **Prohibit all passengers from riding in the cargo areas of pickup trucks.** A strong child passenger safety law should prohibit all passengers from riding in the cargo areas of pickup trucks. When all

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passengers are prohibited, it is more likely that children will not be allowed to ride there. With or without a canopy, riding in the cargo area places all riders at unnecessary risk for death and injury. In a study conducted in Washington State, researchers found that persons riding in cargo areas were nine times more likely to be killed when compared with the general population of those involved in crashes.

Upgrade Child Safety Laws-Eliminate Exemptions

Many State laws have exemptions that allow children to ride unrestrained in certain vehicles and under unique circumstances. Listed below are exemptions and conditions that are included in many laws; leaving children unprotected:

- **Exemption for overcrowded vehicles.** In nearly half of the States, children can ride unsecured if all safety belts are in use.
- **Exemption for "attending to the personal needs of the child."** This encourages adults to carry children in their laps during feeding or other risky activities-behaviors.
- **Loose guidelines for issuing medical waivers that allow children with special medical needs to ride unrestrained.** Advances in child restraint systems have made it possible to accommodate children with almost any type of physical disability.
- **Exemption for out-of-State vehicles, drivers, and children.** Currently, children in many States are not required to be secured if the vehicle or driver is from another State. Children need to be protected, even when they're in a vehicle which is just "passing

through" or riding with a family in a vehicle with an out-of-State license.

- **Exemption for drivers who are not the vehicle owner or who are not related to the children being transported.** There are State laws that do not hold the driver accountable for unrestrained children.

Conduct Combined Public Awareness and Enforcement Campaigns

- **Publicity and enforcement must go hand-in-hand.** Publicity campaigns should educate the public about the importance of proper child passenger protection. Enforcement campaigns should include information on correct use, as well as publicity to raise public awareness of the law and its enforcement.
- **Raise awareness of vehicle/child safety seat compatibility.** Many parents and others who transport children do not understand the potential deadly results caused by a child seat or booster seat that is not properly used and secured in a vehicle.

National Initiative for Increasing Seat Belt Use

On April 16, 1997, the Secretary of Transportation issued the Presidential Initiative for Increasing Seat Belt Use Nationwide. Included in the initiative are ambitious child occupant goals. These goals aim to reduce child occupant fatalities (0-4 years) by 25 percent in 2005 (from a total of 653 in 1996). The National Initiative identifies closing the gaps in child passenger safety laws as an important strategy in meeting these new national goals.

Highway Safety Grant Programs for Occupant Protection Activities

On May 22, 1998, Congress passed H.R. 2400, the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21). A

number of programs established in TEA-21 have a direct impact on seat belt use and occupant protection. Beginning in FY 1999, the Section 157 Seat Belt Incentive Grant program authorized \$500 million over five years to encourage States to increase seat belt use rates. States received funds under this program based on projected annual savings in Federal medical costs resulting from increased seat belt use. States may use these grant funds for any eligible Title 23 project (which may include construction projects). The Act also provides that Section 157 funds not allocated to incentive grants in a fiscal year beginning in FY 2000 be allocated to the States to carry out innovative projects that promote increased seat belt use rates and child passenger safety activities. In addition, the Section 405(a) occupant protection incentive grant program authorized \$83 million over five years to target specific occupant protection laws and programs. Beginning in FY 1999, States received grants under the Section 405 program if they demonstrated that they had in place certain occupant protection laws and programs, such as primary safety belt use laws and special traffic enforcement programs. Finally, Section 2003 (b) of TEA-21 established a program in which the States received grants to carry out child passenger protection education and training activities.

These reports and additional information are available from your State Highway Safety Office, the NHTSA Regional Office serving your State, or from NHTSA Headquarters, Office of Safety Programs, ATTN: NTI-120, 400 Seventh Street, S.W., Washington, DC 20590; 202-366-4295; or NHTSA's web site at www.nhtsa.dot.gov



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